

Hector and Andromache

Barbara Graziosi

Carol Ann Duffy is widely regarded as Britain's leading female poet, famous, among other things, for exploring mythical encounters between husband and wife, and revealing the unspoken female (and often feminist) perspective. *The World's Wife*, one of her most popular collections, exemplifies this beautifully. Here, for example, Mrs Tiresias, wife of the famous soothsayer, who changed from a man to woman and back again, reveals that her husband needed twelve painkillers a day, when he had his first period. And Mrs Darwin, wife of the evolutionary biologist (to quote one non-classical gem) notes a striking resemblance between her husband and a chimp in the zoo.

It is, therefore, not surprising that in the Homeric Encounters series, Carol Ann Duffy was asked to write a poem about Hector and Andromache, one of the most impressive and 'human' couples from classical antiquity. What does come as a surprise is her faithfulness to the original account of their meeting in *Iliad* 6. Duffy does not choose to expose, say, Hector's confused notions of bravery, or Andromache's frustrated intelligence. Nor does she tell the story from a radically new perspective as she does that of Tiresias above. Rather she plays with the parameters of Homer's original perspective, carefully poised as it is between the points of view of husband and wife. The reason, perhaps, is quite simple: a good couple is a rare thing, in literature as in life, and when you encounter one, you do not want to mess it up.

An Homeric perspective

In *Iliad* 6 Hector and Andromache meet in unusual circumstances. Hector has entered the city on a short mission but before returning to the battlefield decides to go home briefly and see his wife. Finding the house empty, he thinks that she might have gone to visit some relatives or perhaps to the temple. Instead he is told that she has run up to the top of the city walls to scan the battlefield and see whether he is still alive. He finally meets her at the Scaean gates. This space affects their interaction. They are both, in a sense, out of context: Andromache should be at home, Hector on the battlefield. Instead, they meet half way and, partly because they are unsure about their own position, they end up expressing views which do not match their traditional roles.

Andromache addresses Hector with an extraordinary speech. First she performs a formal lamentation as though he were dead. Traditionally, when a man died, the women closest to him performed a lament, at his funeral: each woman, in turn, addressed the deceased man, then sang his praises, described her relationship to him, and finally closed her lamentation by stating how his death would affect her future life. After the end of her speech, Andromache returns to the present to give Hector some military guidance: he should put the people in front of the most vulnerable part of the walls while he himself should remain safely inside. Ancient readers of the *Iliad* found this aspect of her speech striking, even objectionable: the commentaries or 'scholia' that survive in the margins of later manuscripts of Homer (see Pat Easterling's piece in *Omnibus* 50) sniff that Andromache 'gives Hector alternative strategic advice'.

If Andromache oversteps her traditional role (by performing a lament in front of her *living* husband and by her views on military tactics), Hector's reply to her is equally startling. He begins by explaining in rather predictable terms why he must fight. He would feel shame in front of the men and women of Troy if he

did what she suggested: he wants to win glory for himself and his own father. But he continues with a less conventional, more personal reason for returning to the battlefield. In his heart of hearts, he knows that Troy will fall, but he does not want to witness Andromache's captivity: he would rather be dead than see her suffer like that.

It is Astyanax, their baby son, who finally makes them smile. He is afraid of his father's helmet, so Hector takes it off, embraces his baby son, tosses him up in the air (a chilling reminder that, after the fall of Troy, the Greeks will toss him from the walls), says a prayer for him, then gives him back to his mother, who smiles through her tears. At this point, Hector talks to Andromache again: he tells her to go back to the house and tend to her duties. This is the last encounter between them: next time we see Andromache running up to the walls, in book 22, her husband is already dead. Hector's last words to his wife may seem abrupt but we must remember that both Hector and Andromache find themselves in an impossible place and in an impossible situation. Hector suggests that returning to their respective duties may help them cope with the pain.

Contemporary readings and retellings

Readers of Homer today are likely to be affected by a redefinition of gender roles which is currently under way. We are all familiar with the arguments: women should have the opportunity to work outside the home, men should have the option to stay at home and look after the children. Read against such aspirations, the experiences of men and women in the Homeric poems seem to be shaped by a strict separation of male and female duties: Hector should do the fighting, Andromache the housework. The imagined futures of these two characters also seem to differ radically: Hector faces death, Andromache slavery. It may come as a surprise, then, that according to Andromache she and Hector 'share the same fate' (*Iliad* 22.477). But perhaps their last meeting in *Iliad* 6 helps to illustrate what she means by this: although husband and wife view life from radically different vantage points, they share and understand the fundamental experiences of love, suffering, and fear, as well as joy at the sight of baby Astyanax. The rare achievement of this Homeric encounter, then, is that it depicts a loving couple without eliding any of the tensions, differences of expression (e.g. her emotional appeal, his talk of duty), or inevitable marital disagreements.

Carol Ann Duffy decided to keep the Homeric perspective rather than re-tell the story exclusively from the point of view of Andromache or, indeed, Hector: in doing so, she pays homage to the difficult balance achieved in the Homeric poem. Her contribution, as a poet, manifests itself most in the detail: for example, the significance of space is clear from the start, where we experience the contrast between the dark, narrow alleys of Troy and the open plain where Hector is heading. Even the anachronism she introduces (Greek men did not get married in armour) serves to underline the contrast between Andromache's warm, soft breasts and the cold, hard feel of Hector the warrior – while at the same time evoking the couple's shared past. But it is the description of Astyanax that remains, for me, most memorable: despite Hollywood, Duffy manages to call him a star, a 'swaddled star'.

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Carol Ann Duffy

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These words, like shadows, followed Hector's stride all through the town, along the avenues, ducking down cool alleyways, his helmet's sudden flash, his cape's dark swish, disappearing round the corner of walled lanes, until he reached the Skaian Gates through which he'd pass, a warrior, to the battlefield. Then – running feet – he turned and saw, vivid with love, his wife Andromakhe, daughter of big-hearted Eetion who'd ruled the forest lands at Thebe below Mount Plakos. She clung to her husband, felt the cold press of his bronze against her breasts as on her wedding day. Behind her stood her maid, nursing their infant son – in Hector's eyes, the world's reward, a swaddled star, this child he always called Skamandrios but who was known to other men as Astyanax, Prince of the City, his father being the shield of Troy. So on his baby, Hector, silent, smitten, smiled. Andromakhe clutched Hector's hands. He felt her hot tears cooling on each palm and heard her cry: 'Stop, Hector! You're possessed! This lust for bravery will see you dead. Why not take pity on your son? On me? How will I live when you've been butchered by the Greeks? You'll see me wear a nightgown of cold earth, climb in a bed of soil, lie down with grief? My father's dead, slaughtered by swift Achilles when he ransacked Thebe. He spared his corpse and armour, torched them and his finely crafted weapons in a pyre, then built a mound. Elms were planted there by Zeus's mountain nymphs. My mother's dead. My seven brothers entered Death's House in a bloody line. Achilles killed all seven as they grazed their herds, their silver sheep, their lumbering cattle with their bells, then seized my mother, who'd been Queen of tree-rich Thebe, as spoils of war. He freed her quickly for a priceless sum, but as she ran into her father's marble halls, Artemis, playing with her arrows, shot her dead. Father, Hector? I have only you. Mother? I have only you. Brother, brother, brother, I have only you. Lover – warm and living – I have you. Be merciful! Climb to the lookout here! Don't orphan your defenceless child and widow me. Gather the Trojan army by the wild figtree: it's where the city wall is low and vulnerable. Three times the Greeks have stormed us there, their best men led by two named Ajax, famed Idomeneus, Agamemnon, Menelaus and brave Diomedes. Either the oracle or their furious bloodthirst led them there.' Hector's helmet flamed with sunlight as he said: 'Lady, mother of my son, these shadows darken my mind too. But I would die of shame if Trojan noblemen and Trojan women in their lovely, trailing gowns saw me back down from battle. Nor do I want to for myself. War is in my blood, bred in the bone from boyhood, to fight and be first forward for my father's honour and my own. My heart tells me the day will come when Troy will fall, when Priam's ash-spear falters in his fist and he and all his people die. What makes me suffer now is not the thought of all their agonies – the Trojan people, Hecabe herself, King Priam, all my brave brothers bleeding to nothing in the dust before our enemies – but you, the day some sweating bronze-clad Greek

drags you in tears away from freedom's light – drags you to Greece to squat before another woman's loom or carry water from a well, at Messeis or Hypereie, the yoke of slavery chafing your neck. "That's Hector's wife" they'll say, seeing you weep. "Hector was bravest when they fought on stallions at Troy." They'll say that and your heart will break again, hearing the name that could have kept you free. No! Let grave-dirt clog my mouth and eyes and ears before I hear them dragging you away, your helpless cries!' As these words left his lips, Hector bent his soldier's head and held his arms out for his child. The baby wailed, cowered on his nurse's breast, terrified at seeing his father helmeted in dazzling bronze, a bristling horsehair plume alive on top. But loving Hector laughed and then Andromakhe laughed too. Hector pulled his helmet from his head and knelt to place it, sparkling, on the ground. He kissed his child and swung him in the air then said this prayer: 'Zeus and all you gods, allow this child, my son, to grow into the Lord of Troy. Let him be strong and brave, like me, and rule with power, and let men say "The son is better than the father" when he rides home victorious from battle, with some dead warrior's bloody armour slung across his horse to make his mother proud.' Hector passed the infant to his mother like a gift. She held him to her perfumed breast, laughing now despite her tears, and Hector's pity ached. He held her face between his hands and said: 'Andromakhe, dear love, don't cry for me with such despair. No man will send me to the place of Death before my time. And no man living can escape his fate. Coward or hero – that hour is with him from his birth. Go home. Sit at your loom and do your woman's work and set your women to their tasks as well. War is the work of men, for every man who's born of Troy, and most of all for me.' He bent and picked his blazing helmet from the earth.